

Loving What Is Right

Gary Henry

Even if you are not a student of the Bible, you will have heard of the “Good Samaritan” parable in Luke 10:25-37. On the road from Jerusalem down to Jericho, a certain man lay half dead, having been beaten and robbed by thieves. When a priest happened by, he noticed the man in need, but gave no help. Later a Levite came along. Not wanting to get involved either, he “passed by on the other side” just like the priest. But when a despised Samaritan came to the scene, he did what was needed, at considerable inconvenience and expense. Jesus said he “showed mercy,” and the Good Samaritan now stands as a symbol for anyone who actively serves the needs of his fellow man.

But I wonder about the priest and the Levite. Weren’t they “good” men? It seems not unlikely that their next-door neighbors would have described them as “decent, clean, upstanding folks.” They both had steady jobs. They were probably friendly when you saw them, but also minded their own business. Likely they kept their lawn up so as not to be an embarrassment to the neighborhood. They didn’t let their teenagers get drunk and hot rod up and down the street at two in the morning, etc., etc. Surely they were “good, moral people” weren’t they?

Well, the priest and the Levite were good in exactly the sense that many of us think of ourselves as being good: they did not murder, did not commit adultery, did not lie, etc. They perhaps secretly congratulated themselves for being above average morally because they would not stoop to engage in the despicable things they frowned on in others. The strength of their own morality was measured by the intensity of their negative feelings about the immorality of other people. They were “good” because they had a long list of practices they felt strongly against. In other words, righteousness for them meant scrupulously avoiding un-righteousness.

We shouldn’t minimize the importance of fleeing evil, obviously. But there is more to being truly moral than looking down on immorality in others. One of my favorite quotations is a line from Roy Masters which says: “Loving what is right is different from hating what is wrong and feeling right about it.” This means that we don’t truly qualify as being on the side of truth and goodness if all we do is criticize the sin we see around us. There is, of course, no lack of things in the world that are wrong, and we ought to feel a genuine revulsion for these sins. But neither ought we to confuse this revolting feeling with a true love for what is good.

It is also a mistake to confuse a merely intellectual appreciation of goodness with genuine love for what is right. Really loving what is right goes beyond abstract appreciation. Many years ago, Charles Finney made this observation: “Moral agents are so constituted, that they necessarily approve of moral worth or excellence; and when even sinners behold right character, or moral goodness, they are compelled to respect

and approve it, by a law of their intelligence. This they not infrequently regard as evidence of goodness in themselves. But this is doubtless just as common in hell as it is on earth. The veriest sinners on earth or in hell, have, by the unalterable constitution of their nature, the necessity imposed upon them, of paying intellectual homage to moral excellence." And neither is an eagerness to debate issues of right and wrong proof that we love the good. As Adlai Stevenson remarked, "It is oft en easier to fight for our principles than to live up to them." No, truly loving what is good requires actively doing what is good!

A part of our problem here is that we tend to judge others by their actual performance, while we judge ourselves by our ideals. We think of ourselves as being fairly "good" because we know that our goals and intentions are good. We may not be doing much about our goals, but we render a favorable verdict on ourselves anyway, because we know what we are capable of doing, what we are going to do in the future, etc. But the person who truly loves what is right is not merely the person with high ideals and positive potential — he is the actual doer of good. When there is mercy to be shown, Jesus' commendation falls upon the person who loves mercy enough to show it, making a personal sacrifice if necessary in order to do so.

Talk is cheap, as the saying goes. So, in a certain sense, are our intentions. Can do and have done don't even live in the same neighborhood. "To him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin" (Jas. 4:17). Loving what is right demands that we do more than complain about the world going to the dogs while we watch the evening news from the comfort of a recliner.